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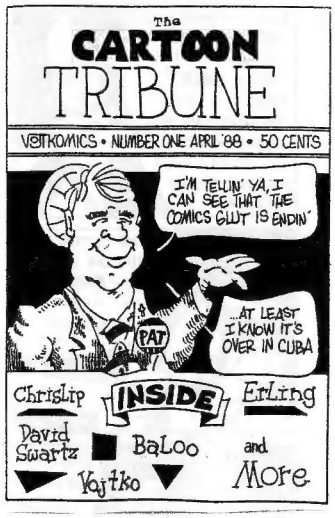
THE INTERVIEW FALLACY

Many more people are writing about comics these days and we are finally getting past the cliché article about comic book values which too often praises the dreck of the deep past at the expense of the more polished art of the present. With the increased interest in comic art and the people who perpetrate it, the interview has become predominant, which is nice, but an interview without background research has questionable historical value. In reality, the interview is extremely limited, dealing as it does with the opinions and memories of aa subject who may or may not know what he is talking about. There *are* cartoonist intellectuals; on the other hand, there are folks who draw quite well yet seldom read anything but comic books, their own and those of others. An interview is always colored by ego. It deals with what a particular artist is trying to hype at the moment, what he is willing to tell a reporter, what kind of mood he is in, and with what his publishers are willing to allow in print, given the eccentricities of their advertisers.

Senior cartoonists are rarely, if ever, college graduates. Most are the product of individual talent enhanced by mail order cartooning courses, which were widely advertised in the classified sections of pulp magazines during the twenties and thirties. Today's generation of cartoonists have some college and not a few are graduates. What this means to the reporter is simple. The older cartoonist is a fountain of nostalgic information about what it was like in the days of the Chesler or Eisner/Iger studios, how it felt to work in the sweat shops run by the syndicates and the animation studios, what the early cartoonists were like, the kinds of gags they pulled and the amount of booze they drank.

I remember reading Boody Rogers autobiography, HOMEWARD BOUND, expecting to learn something about Sparky Watts who was always a favorite of mine in the early forties. Rogers spent most of his book talking about drinking bouts with Zack Mosley and other friends and he barely mentioned Sparky Watts' name. To me, the character was important; to him, Sparky, a parody superhero, was just one of hundreds of strips he worked on and had no more or less significance than any of his others.



COMIX PLUGOLA

Mary Fleener's newest is CHICKEN SLACKS GOT SOUL. $2.50 PP from 309 Oceanview Ave, Encinitas, CA 92024.* From Randy H. Crawford, NICE DAY COMIX is $1.50 pp. 911 Park St. SW. Ask for Randy's list of mini-comix.* JOHNNY B. GOODE 2 is 35¢/stamp from Concrete Caverns Graphix, 702 Greenwich Ave., Suite 186, New York, N Y 10011.* Volume 4 of Fantagraphic's COMPLETE CRUMB series takes Crumb into the sixties. * PUMA BLUES has moved to Mirage. a company supported by four strong turtles, teenage mutant ninjas all. That title is now at #18.* EL VIBORA 108, your window into the underground psyche of Spain, is $7 from J. M. Berengueur, Plaza Beatas 3, Barcelona, Spain.

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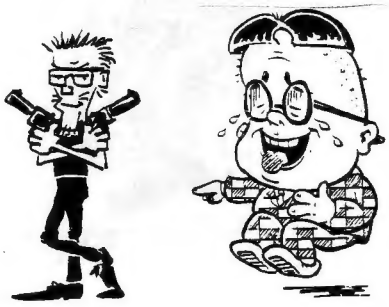
BIZARRO
By DAN PIRARO
WE VIDEOTAPED OURSELVES WATCHING OUR FAVORITE MOVIE. NOW WE CAN WATCH OUR FAVORITE FILM AND WATCH OURSELVES ENJOYING IT!....LIFE JUST GETS BETTER AND BETTER!
PIRARO.



Today, the interview is a sales technique and the artist is a product to be peddled along with his character. The authors seen on talk shows are peddling their books the way drummers used to peddle neckties on street corners. What is at stake? The sale of the going character or series, not the truth about anything. We're dealing with vested interests, bosses, owed favors, belated promises, and all the hustle and bustle that surrounds any entertainment in the electronic age, and there is no more intellectual honesty in the comic business than there is in any other business.

Artists compete. They do not love each other. Read the letter columns in the various hypezines. Artists lie to one another and they lie to interviewers and they have an ego just like yours. They are not likely to say anything that is going to cost them money or make them look bad in print. Privately, however, they will often say what they think. I recall many occasions in my life as a reporter when I heard one artist insult another, and I'm not talking about amateurs. I'm taking about men who are internationally famous for their newspaper strips. Behind the scenes, you hear the real critiques. *Look at that anatomy. Son-of-a-bitch never learned how to draw. Look at the way he faked this panel. Look at this shit. Nothing but traced photographs. Without a light box, this character would be washing dishes at Jack-in-the-Box.* Interviewed on a panel at a convention, the same artist would have nothing but praise for his peers. Why not? That's human nature. Criticism in private, loyalty in public. What business would survive if it were otherwise?

An artist can't tell you something he doesn't know, but when you ask, his status is at stake; being a cartoonist, he *ought to know* so he will make up an answer that sounds good, confident that most interviewers will print what he says without checking his facts. Comics pubs tend not to have research assistants the way TIME has and though comics criticism is on the upswing those in the field still retain an inbred feeling that comics are not worth *that much time.* The reader is in the same frame of mind. He likes to read all that art hype, but he isn't going to check out the artist or writer, because he doesn't have the time or the interest. It's a game of questions and answers like a tv quiz show; it's entertainment, and the facts are irrelevant.

Does the artist *remember*? No more than anyone else. If he keeps a diary, he can look up when he did this or that story, but most of the day to day inkers just do the pages and live their lives. The stories tend to flow together, particularly if they are about a continuing character, and who cares when this or that story ran? Big deal. It's fan-boy trivia. You hear the questions from the audiences at conventions and this fan only asks them because he heard someone else ask them at the last con. *How long does it take you to ink a page? Didn't so and so do that last couple of pages in the umpteenth issue of the Incredible Bulk?* It's not quite as bad on some of the younger artists who are used to all this bologna by now, but consider the older artists who may have done that stuff thirty or forty years ago. Ask Jack Kirby about a particular story concerning the Newsboy Legion or even Kamandi and you will really be participating in theater of the absurd. I suspect Jack has to check his own history from time to time if he worries about that sort of thing. What Jack would remember and tell you would be when he stopped working with Joe Simon, because cartoonists like normal people remember their friends and co-workers much

longer than the product they were turning out from week to week at the studio.

A writer in this field, a comic historian, has to get into the habit of doing research, *primary research*, and get away from the neverending round of personal likes and dislikes, the war of personalities. After all, the writer and the artist are in a related business. One needs the other. Comic books depend on story as much as art. Ask any kid. Whether or not the comics business needs critics or historians is open to dispute. After all, the industry has its own built-in hype department, but the inner sanctum must always present Schlockman as the greatest thing since Superman and any real critic would find himself sliding down the laundry chute with Julie Schwartz' soiled white shirts.

I fell into writing comic criticism back in the early seventies. It was unintentional. I wasn't interested in comic books at the time. I was writing for underground newspapers and I met Roger Brand on my rounds and did an article about his work. He passed me along to other underground cartoonists, some of whom were friendly and understood my role as a reporter, many of whom didn't understand and rejected me as they would any outsider. I went from cartoonist to cartoonist, interviewing them, printing what they said in my COMIX WORLD columns in the underground papers. I took their word for things and didn't bother to check up on them. I didn't care. If they lied to me or put me on, it made them look bad when it was printed. It didn't bother me one way or another. I did so many different stories back them that I seldom spent more than a couple of hours on any one subject.

As I got to know the comix and the artists and began to develop an overview of what it was all about, I started to check on the facts, to research the history of comics, to read the various biographies and books of essays, and I became a lot more careful about what I put into print. *I started to ask questions about the questions.* to wonder why people told me things they knew weren't true. What I discovered was that each artist had his own view of how things had evolved, that underground comix, for example, had come from different regions of America and that each clique considered its own books *as important as or more important than* those done by any other group. These cartoonists denied being competitive while they were often fiercely competitive. When I started doing COMIX WORLD as a newsletter in 1973, I got into the middle of a lot of things. I knew that the underground titles were closed shops, that Crumb, Wilson, et al, didn't let anyone into ZAP, so when I started getting inquiries about ZAP and other books I told the newcomers the truth. They might get The Print Mint or Last Gasp to do a book of theirs if it was well drawn and held the interest of Bob Rita or Ron Turner, but they might as well save their postage and forget about submitting stories for the closed titles of these companies. I could have saved my breath, however, because most sent their stuff anyway. Hey, what did I know? Who was I? I was the person who saw the box of unread letters and artwork on Ron Turner's desk and knew that he seldom responded to any of it, but my readers *out there* could hardly know this.

I found myself in numerous bizarre situations, most of which I only understood later. I remember interviewing Greg Irons and Tom Veitch down in Stinson Beach shortly after Last Gasp had published their LEGION OF CHARLIES. Well, I didn't know anything about the book or the guys who had done it. Ron Turner gave me a copy of CHARLIES along with some other comix he had just published and suggested I talk to Greg and promote the book in my column. I drove out to Stinson and what did I find? Greg and Tom practically hiding out in this old aircraft hanger, both of them afraid that Charley Manson would send some of his hit people after them for what they suggested about him in LEGION OF CHARLIES. Greg had drawn caricatures of himself and Veitch on brown grocery sacks and that's the only way they would be photographed.

I wasn't sympathetic. I was, in fact, pissed off about the whole thing. I had driven all the way down there with a friend, thinking I was going to do a routine interview, take some notes, a few pictures, and spend a little time walking around on the beach. Instead, I found myself dealing with Greg's paranoia. I took a picture of them with the bags on their heads, but I never ran it. Manson's people had just massacred Sharon Tate and her friends down in Los Angeles, but from what I understood about Manson's philosophy he was out to kill rich people and make it look like Blacks did it so he could start a new civil war. I never thought he would go after a cartoonist. For all I know, the whole afternoon might have been a put-on, Greg and Veitch having a little fun at my expense.

NOW KEEP YOUR HANDS OFF MY MOJO, IF YOU AIN'T GOT A BUCK! TIMES IS HARD AS HARD CAN BE I DON'T WANT NO BROKEN MAN MESSIN' 'ROUND WITH ME
NOW ME PUTTIN' MY HANDS ON YOUR MOJO-HONEY, WHAT HARM WOULD THAT DO?
HM! NOW IF YOU EVER START TO LOVIN' ME NOW WOULDN'T THAT BE JUST FINE!
MARY FLEENER '39

But being a reporter, you get involved with other people's lives. I often felt like an intruder which is probably why I drifted away from the business and into research. I began to dislike being around people and dealing with their personal problems, while retaining the ambivalent status of a reporter. I was a part of things, yet I was still an outsider. There were times when I wanted to act as a friend, yet I was rejected as simply a member of the press. It was as though someone in my line of work could not be a friend. My attitude was positive, or so I thought; I just wanted to help cartoonists get some publicity so they could make a living drawing and putting out comix, but my motives were often misinterpreted.

After all, there is some validity to telling someone's story when that person is not a writer and cannot tell it for him or herself, but when the opposite is true, the situation becomes more complex. Before Max Scherr, founder and editor of the Berkeley BARB, died, I used to try to get him to do an interview with me. I wanted to tell his story. Well, Max had in mind telling his own story, which was valid; he was always a writer, but he died in the meantime and the story went untold. Doubtless, there is someone going through his letters and diaries, etc., and one day we will see a biography of this seminal underground figure, but it will carry someone else's byline, perhaps someone who knew him a lot less well than I did.

I think the best interviews are done by groupies, folks who just hero worship without any sense of history. If I become involved in an interview with someone and I find out they know less than I do about their own field I have misgivings and question the validity of the entire situation. On tv, you wonder why everyone is so articulate, but the answers to the questions are right there on the monitor in front of them, so you have a couple of people reading a script to you. It's not like that when you go out with a note pad or a tape recorder and try to work up something that will look good in print. Some people have content, but they are simply not verbal. They have to draw it, write it out, even put it on film or video tape. I have a hard time with interviews. If the subject says something ridiculous, I want to get into it, to call it like it is, not write it down. I'm not a shrink. I take the *interview* seriously and consider my *view* as valid as that of the subject. Why would I be there otherwise? *WHOEVER* can write his own article. I get really upset with the wimps I see on tv all the time, the people who never voice an opinion about all the lies they hear from the business men and politicians. I say, call them out. Talk back.

Of course, I'm my own man. They can't fire me.

For background on the Manson family, see Ed Sanders' THE FAMILY and Vincent Bugliosi's HELTER SKELTER. The comix done by Greg Irons and Tom Veitch are available from Last Gasp Comix in San Francisco. Charles Manson is still locked up in San Quenton.